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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001096

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL INSIDER DESCRIBES POSSIBLE GOVERNMENT
EXIT STRATEGY

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Geeta Pasi for reasons 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Nazim Kamran Chowdhury, a prominent ad executive with close ties to the government, defended the government's decision to put off national elections until late 2008 and described his efforts to persuade the Chief Adviser to assert himself more politically. Chowdhury said the military is backing away from plans to create a "king's party" and is trying to position reformist elements in the two leading parties. END SUMMARY

A DEMOCRACY "IN NAME ONLY"
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¶2. (SBU) On June 20, SCA Pakistan and Bangladesh Office Director Karen Aguilar and POLOFF met with Nazim Kamran Chowdhury. Among his many connections, Chowdhury is president of Bangladesh's largest marketing company ADCOMM, husband of government advisor (i.e., minister) Geetiara Safiya Chowdhury, and cousin of Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed. Chowdhury is also a well-known Bangladeshi political commentator and former Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) member of parliament from Sylhet.

¶3. (C) Chowdhury told us that before "one-eleven" (Bangladeshi short-hand for the January 11 declaration of a state of emergency), Bangladesh was a democracy in name only. He asked why the U.S. was pushing for "early" elections, saying "elections don't make a democracy - institutions make a democracy."

¶4. (C) According to Chowdhury the distortion of the political system and rampant corruption create a void at the local level that Islamic fundamentalist groups seek to exploit. He said institution-building is required from the bottom up to create a real democracy, close that vacuum, and prevent the growth of fundamentalism. "National elections won't address this issue," he told us, "and they shouldn't be viewed as a panacea for Bangladesh's problems." He expects the government will announce a road-map in July that will call for local elections first, with national elections to come by December 2008.

A SHY, TECHNOCRAT CHIEF ADVISER...
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¶5. (C) He described Chief Advisor Ahmed as shy and a manager by nature. Fakhruddin's reluctance to involve himself in anything political or to be out front in public has created a gap that different elements -- such as the military and

certain outspoken government advisors -- have sought to fill. In Chowdhury's view, the Chief Advisor is not being forced into a specific (subservient) role by the military. "There is room for Fakhruddin to step up if he so chooses," Chowdhury said. "The military is filling a vacuum, not putting him in a box."

...TRYING TO ASSERT HIMSELF
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¶6. (C) Chowdhury and other informal advisors have been pressing Fakhruddin to address more political issues in the advisory council, and to improve the government's public relations and outreach by getting out of Dhaka and speaking to the people. Chowdhury put together an ambitious outreach strategy, but the Chief Advisor "got carried away" on his initial visit to Tangail in April. He wandered off his 20-minute speech, speaking for over an hour in 100-plus degree heat, and ultimately succumbed to dehydration. "Still, he needs to get out and be seen as more engaged, a leader," said Chowdhury.

A POSSIBLE END-GAME
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¶7. (C) Chowdhury thinks Chief of Army Staff Moeen was sufficiently chastened after he gave a speech on April 1 which many interpreted as a foray into politics. "Certain individuals have backed away from a future in politics, and most have backed away from creating a third, military-backed government," Chowdhury said, referring to widespread reports the military is trying to create a "king's party" to contest elections. He claimed many in the military now prefer, as an exit strategy, a deal with the reform wings of both parties

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that banishes their current heads, and guarantees the military some form of indemnity.

COMMENT: CONTOURS OF AN EXIT STRATEGY?
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¶8. (C) Chowdhury is the ultimate insider, a relative to two advisers (Fakhruddin and Foreign Advisor Iftekhar Chowdhury), and spouse of another (Geetiara). When POLOFF met him in April, he was much more suspicious about the role of the military and more concerned about the possible political ambitions of certain military figures. In this latest meeting, Chowdhury seemed to feel these issues were slowly being resolving and the military's role was receding somewhat. Nevertheless, his proffered exit strategy for the military, specifically indemnity for actions during the state of emergency, implicitly acknowledges the important role the military plays in the current political balance. END COMMENT.

¶9. (U) This message was drafted after SCA/PB Director Aguilar departed Dhaka.
PASI